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ABSTRACT

The University of Michigan's English Professional Semester (Pro Sem) is an upper level interdisciplinary program that explores student-centered approaches to the teaching of writing and literature. An advanced essay writing course, a senior literature seminar, an English methods class, and an observation practicum in local schools are integrated into a team-taught program that attempts to bring together reading, writing, and criticism in the context of teaching English to middle and secondary school students. The concept of "underlife" (as delineated by Robert Brooke) both informs and frustrates program participants as they formulate new lines of inquiry. Underlife can be understood as activities or behaviors that individuals engage in to show how they differ from identities assigned to them. One semester, student response to the demands of the class led to moves to decentralize classroom authority, although students were reticent to act on problems they were given the freedom to solve. Student comments recorded during a grievance period illustrate the idea of engaging in underlife activity in the ProSem. The concept of underlife thus comes to be seen as a critical aspect of the process of achieving both individual and social autonomy. In the classroom setting, social autonomy means a self-sustaining classroom community of learners that is empowered both by sharing their convictions and acting on those convictions. (SG)

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John Stratman

"Reflections on Robert Brooke's 'Underlife and Writing Instruction': Implications for Pre-Student Teachers in an English Methods Class"

A Paper Presented at the
National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention
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Panel Participants:

Chair: *Anne Ruggles Gere, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor*

Speakers: *John Stratman, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor*
Lisa Perczak, Rolling Meadows High School, Chicago
"Is This Underlife?"
Maria Emmert, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
"Is This Underlife?"
Ted Lardner Cleveland State University, Cleveland
"Is This Teacher Education?"

Recorder/Reactor: *Mary Kollar, Woodinville High School, Seattle*

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"Reflections on Robert Brooke's 'Underlife and Writing Instruction': Implications for Pre-Student Teachers in an English Methods Class"

When I reflect upon the ten years I have been in English Education--as a language arts teacher in secondary schools, as a composition instructor at the university level, and as a teaching supervisor in post-secondary and higher education--I can recall few articles that have helped my students understand the complex social character of English classrooms more than Robert Brooke's "Underlife and Writing Instruction." The central point of Brooke's article, that in contemporary writing instruction both students and teachers undercut traditional roles in order to substitute more complex identities in their place--and that such behaviors are normal, necessary, and desirable in the course of making new meanings--is significant not only because it shows, in Brooke's words, "a process at the core of our discipline," but because it also shows *what is at stake* in this process--"who the individuals in the classroom will be" (151-52).

For each of the 27 students who participated last fall in Michigan's English Professional Semester, the question, "Who will I be?" was perhaps the most persistent and most provocative question encountered all term. I say "persistent" because whether this question was addressed explicitly--as when the teaching team asked students to think of metaphors for what a teacher needs to know, to be, or to do--or conveyed implicitly--as when the class debate over the book list identified, in the words of one student, "the liberals and conservatives among us," the question remained as pressing in December as the first day of class. And I say "provocative" because regardless of how this question was posed, it framed major implications that our students were obliged to consider. In one sense it implied: "What kind of *student* do I want to be in this class?" In another sense: "What kind of *writer* do I want to be, or perhaps need to be in order for this student identity to succeed?" And lastly: "What kind of *teacher* do I want to be, and by whose standards will I measure my progress as I create for myself this character?"

How the concept of *underlife* both informed and frustrated students as they responded to these questions, and how, as a result of those responses, they found it necessary to formulate new lines of inquiry, will be the focus of my remarks here this afternoon. Before proceeding, I would like to introduce the context which brings our panel together, Michigan's Professional Semester.

Offered every fall term, the class more commonly known as "ProSem" among students and faculty, is an upper-level interdisciplinary seminar that explores student-centered approaches to the teaching of writing and literature, and which allows senior English majors to meet certification requirements in both English and Education by combining them into a single observation and seminar experience. An advanced essay writing course, a senior literature seminar, an English methods class, and an observation practicum in local schools, are integrated in a team-taught program that attempts to bring together the parts of English--reading, writing, criticism--in the context of the teaching of English to middle and secondary students (Howes, 3). By completing the semester, students complete a formidable reading list, compose an extensive amount of formal and informal writing, observe in classrooms a minimum of 60 hours, tutor students a minimum of 10 hours, and are otherwise given the opportunity to experience the rigors of the teaching profession firsthand. One measure of this substantial effort is that students earn a total of 12 credits for the course, 7 in English and 5 in Education.

My personal interest in teaching ProSem was piqued by stories I had heard from colleagues who had taught the course, and by testimonials I had read from former ProSem students. According to these participants, the Professional Semester represented an opportunity to "form a close community;" to "immerse...in a total learning situation;" and to achieve "a camaraderie and a supportive environment in which to share problems, solutions, and advice" (3). As a graduate student planning to write his dissertation on "Community as Epistemology in the Teaching of Writing," I was eager to learn how this environment was created; how, over the years, it had been possible to do so, consistently; and why the conditions for

creating this climate were seemingly more favorable in this English and Education context than in others which dealt primarily with the teaching of writing. As the progress of my thesis continues, I realize my curiosity has not gone unrewarded.

While our ProSem students of last fall collaborated with the teaching team to arrange large and small group projects and discussions, visits by guest consultants, field trips, and social outings, it was the team's decision to add "Underlife in Writing Instruction" to the class reading list. Brooke's article was selected for its strong explication of and support for the workshop approach to writing; for the way it articulated a theory of identity negotiation that had been researched in actual composition practice; and for the possible assistance his study might offer students who were learning for the first time to conduct themselves as participant-observers in reading and writing classrooms.

In his essay, Brooke credits his understanding of underlife to his reading in sociological theory, most notably, Erving Goffman's major works, *Stigma* and *Asylums*. Both texts chronicle the identity development of persons living in restricted, institutionalized settings; the former, of inmates in prison, the latter, of mental patients in psychiatric hospitals. In *Stigma*, Brooke discovered that the concept of underlife rested on certain assumptions about the nature of human beings as social beings. First, *a person's identity is assumed to be a function of social interaction* (142). This is to say we form our initial impressions about a person's character based on their general appearance, our knowledge of their personal history, and what we know about positions they take toward groups we assume they belong to. After this initial encounter our impressions strengthen or diminish based on the outcome of identity negotiations initiated through further social contact. Second, *social interaction is assumed to be a system of information games* (142). This notion suggests that impressions about identity are formed when individuals present information about their uniqueness, when varied facets of the self are exchanged in accordance with the social occasion. Judgements made during the course of this exchange are considered a kind of game because they are largely dependent on information someone chooses to give us.

Third, *social organizations are assumed to provide roles for individuals, and these roles imply certain kinds of identities* (143). Because social organizations convey their expectations for behavior through guidelines and rules, and these rules place restrictions on certain kinds of actions, by implication, they also place restrictions on the kind of person one is allowed to be.

Given this theoretical basis for social interaction, *underlife* can be understood as activities or behaviors individuals engage in to show how they are different from or more complex than the identities assigned to them (142). In its most desirable form, underlife allows the individual to resist asserting one side of their character, in order that another, perhaps more authentic or more compelling side, might emerge.

Contrary to what he anticipated, Brooke discovered that the institutionalized forms of underlife he observed in a freshman writing class were often connected in meaningful ways to planned classroom activity. Most forms were examples of *contained* underlife: stance-taking gestures which though different in character than what may be desired, essentially create little friction, and, in fact, often complement expected actions and behaviors in unexpected ways (151). For example, when Brooke observed students finding creative uses for lessons plans other than what the teacher intended, or students commenting aloud on roles taken by peers who were actively participating in class, or students making private assessments about assigned classroom activities, he admitted to seeing these behaviors as being conducive to writing workshop instruction, not digressions from it. Convinced that such behaviors exemplify what writing attempts to encourage--the taking of stances; the distancing of "self" from surrounding conditions; the discovery of "voice"--he saw these gestures as helping students to think, to question, and to compose more originally. Brooke explains that to read the above behaviors as misbehaviors is to compromise an opportunity for learning, as it suggests that the best learning must always be performed conditionally:

> *To a teacher thinking only of how well her point is getting across, what seems to be going on in these cases is disruptive: students aren't paying attention, but are*

> *talking to one another about things that don't have to do with class. But to a teacher thinking about how students are using classroom information, these diversions should seem positive. In them, no matter how jokingly, students are actively connecting ideas in the classroom to their own lives...(145)*

The teaching team anticipated that as students visited their respective schools they would observe identity negotiations in underlife forms both similar to and different from Brooke's, and that these observations would make for lively conversation in our forum. What we did not anticipate was the poignancy with which our students would face their own identity negotiations in the Professional Semester, and the destabilizing effect these would genuinely have on our class. I will now describe one such negotiation session involving our entire group, and one teacher's attempt to make sense of the chaos it created.

In October of last year, in a conversation which later became known as "the catharsis," or "the coup" (depending on who you spoke to and what they thought about the nature of the conversation) students requested permission to use regularly scheduled class time to voice certain grievances about course proceedings. This request was immediately granted. Over the course of the next two hours, students expressed reservations about the demanding pace of the class, the rationale for certain activities, the sizable workload, and most emphatically, the implications of the team's decision to award semester grades by means of a collaborative evaluation. While it is difficult to re-create here what it felt like to be a student vying for position in this dialogue, or to be a teacher trying to stand out of the way of it, I believe the following statements from the course transcript will convey some idea of what it meant to engage in underlife activity in the ProSem, and what part this activity may have contributed to the formation of our students' identities. (*Note: The statements below are representative samples and are not listed in the precise order in which they were spoken--though they do approximate it.)*

Student #1:

> *...maybe I'm overly focused on grades, but I've been talking with some other people, and we just have no clue*

like...how we're doing. This is 12 credits...I mean...getting graded in here is not insignificant (4)

Student #2:

...everyone's getting uptight about this grading, and no one has a clue what they're being graded on! Yet everyone is in a panic...I mean we're going to have conferences this week and we'll find out. Why is the grade always so important? I mean, I'm learning a lot. I think we need to work through things, but I'm learning a lot (12)

Student #3:

I'm having a real tough time ascribing to the difference between the theory and the practice...this school that I'm observing in is absolutely nothing like what we're acquiring...and it's just so frustrating. I read Atwell, Zemelman, and I say, "Oh, don't they sound great!" but I wonder if that kind of thing will ever work (5)

Student #4:

I think by reading a book a week...including the type of reading from the coursepack...a lot of us have reached our saturation point. I'd love to take one book, focus on it completely, for three weeks, write five lesson plans on it, hit it from every angle...instead, I've not even finished reading the book. When there's so much work assigned, I just shut down and go home (2)

Student #5:

I'd like to talk about the workload...I dunno...I don't question it maybe because I'm going for that gold star on my forehead...it's a senior seminar--which ever since I started here was yccck...your big thing...so I don't question what it all means at this point (6)

Student #6:

The President turns to his Cabinet for suggestions; and once he's gathered all these suggestions--the eclectic wisdom of some of the smartest guys in town--then he makes a decision. I suggest that...OUR President, the Good Professor, make a decision after she's heard it all--BECAUSE WE AIN'T GONNA AGREE ON NOTHIN'! (18)

(To audience)

I sometimes try to imagine what it would be like for teachers as yourselves to pick up this transcript and begin reading it--what would your thoughts be? What would you say? For example, would you say this outcry is a confirmation of our intent to decentralize classroom authority, or an indication of a failure to actually do so? Would you contend that since only a third of 27 students in the class actually participated in this discussion, that those who spoke could not--should not--be considered a representative voice, but rather a small minority of complainers and grade grubbers looking to make claims without compromise? Would you conclude that these individuals are certainly not exemplary students, or for that matter, exemplary teachers-to-be, because their style of arguing belies an indifference to the very teacherly attributes they elsewhere claim to admire? (Such attributes would include: displaying respect for students and colleagues, exhibiting conduct that maintains decorum in the class, having a sense of open-mindedness and fair play when considering the opinions of others, and being calm, clear, and rational when dealing with disruptions.) In sum, would you be tempted to say, "These are not very good students, for this is not how good students behave"?

I would like to read another passage from this same conversation. I refer to the speaker here as "David," since his words evoke an image of a young man with a slingshot taking aim at a force greater than he, and one by appearances beyond his control.

David:

> *I think my frustrations with this course are the frustrations I've had ever since 7th grade...with school (laughter). And the frustrations which most make me pause when I think of about being a teacher, are mainly how...how do you teach kids, or adults,with books? And especially teachers...I mean it's impossible to educate people to be teachers in a classroom of their own. The only way you can learn it is to do it, and I've been frustrated because I had an opportunity in my observing situation to spend a lot of time in front of the class, but I...I can't because I don't have time to prepare because I'm too busy doing what feels to me like busy work. Uh...so yeah, I've been frustrated*

> *about things...it's the problem with school...uh...on one hand, where else will you have better opportunity to...under some guidance to explore ideas, and on the other hand, the guidance is exactly what gets in your way (7).*

As I reflect on David's closing observation, I am struck by how nearly it approximates one from Brooke, when he states: "If our goal as writing teachers is to enable students to see themselves as and to act as writers, then our role as teachers making assignments and evaluating their performance *can only get in the way*" (150, italics mine). One need only to substitute here the word "teacher" for "writer" to deduce that the central problem of writing instruction is also the central problem of teacher education; that is, how does one encourage students to become a certain kind of person--a certain kind of teacher--if at some point it is necessary for them to half ignore instructional demands in order to do so? And what should our response as teachers be when this sense of autonomy is achieved? Has David achieved it?

When I think about David's anger, his frustration, his delusion, his sense of missed opportunities--and I measure this against the pressure he feels from too much directive instruction, it is difficult for me as a teacher to feel good about the place he had arrived, and of my part in helping him get there. He has not met my expectations, nor I, his, and in the wake there is mutual disappointment. On the other hand, if I think of David's statement as being a self-affirming one; a gesture in which he recognizes himself in relation to experiences in the classroom, and where he recognizes those experiences in relation to real-world scenarios, then there is a strange sense of satisfaction in hearing his grievance spoken, for in it being spoken, it can be understood, and being understood, it can be responded to accordingly.

The team's response to David and to the rest of the class was (with their permission) to request that students break into groups and begin formulating a plan of action for the remainder of the term. Given this opportunity, they were eventually able to articulate a few constructive suggestions--to spend more time in small groups, to drop unessential texts from the reading list, to press the team to clarify their assessment

plans--but these were nothing as substantial as might have been expected given the control and authority students had secured. In fact, at the end of our 2 hours, and the next 2 days, and the next 2 weeks, there remained a kind of reticence on the part of students to act assertively on the very problems they had given themselves the freedom to solve. It was as though having laid their best hand on the table, and having won, students were uncertain as to how the next card should be played, and what might be at stake in the playing of it.

Of course, classrooms are not card games. As Anne was later to say in her thoughtful commentary to students: "It's our lives we are talking about" (16). I merely wish to suggest that with so much invested in the outcome of this discussion, it was unfortunate that more did not come of it in our seminar. Beyond those parameters, we are still learning about the outcome of this discussion because it is still continuing, as is evident today.

In his most recent work, *Writing and Sense of Self: Identity Negotiations in Writing Workshops*, Brooke's observes: "While identity negotiation clearly goes on in all classrooms and, I suspect, accounts for much of the social and psychological dynamics of any class, certain ways of structuring writing classes promote a less stressful resolution of these processes than others do" (28). He is referring of course to a workshop environment--not unlike the one we tried to establish in ProSem. He goes on to say, "Such less stressful ways of conducting writing classrooms allow participants more opportunity to explore connections between writing and the rest of their lives because the problems of positioning oneself in the classroom are less acute" (28-29). I have tried to think of Brooke's comments in light of students "positioning" themselves in ProSem; a positioning which seemed at least as acute, if not more so, in spite of the extensive writing performed, the lengthy conversations this writing created, and the opportunities both of these offered in helping students find a place for themselves in our class.

For this reason, I wish to close with the suggestion that underlife is not only a critical aspect in the process of achieving individual

autonomy, but a critical aspect in the process of achieving a kind of *social* autonomy as well. By that I mean a self-sustaining classroom community of learners that are not only empowered by the sharing of their convictions, but equally empowered by *acting* on those convictions, knowing that actions are necessary in order to discover what risk-taking is really worth. I believe that such channels for action are always open to us, but that it is up to both teachers and students to get better at recognizing and applying them in ways beneficial to the community. Teachers interested in this "business of building identity," as Brooke describes the nature of writing instruction and as I have characterized the nature of teacher education, should perhaps not concern themselves solely, or even primarily with this business, unless there is equal concern for building a *communal* identity of a stature that can assist us in times when we need it most.

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